

ABSTRACT

CAUGHT BY CULTURE AND CONFLICT: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF ILLITERACY AND EDUCATION

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This study investigates the perceptions of illiterate Palestinian refugee women concerning literacy and education. Working with 50 women's responses to a questionnaire, supplemented by 15 interviews, the study shows the changes in the environment over a span of time beginning when the older participants were children (45 – 50 years ago) through the present and the consequences these changes had on the literacy and/or education of the women and their children. The study finds that there are marked generational differences both in literacy and in attitudes toward education. There are strong indications that the cultural factors that militated against women's education and led to the older participants' lack of basic literacy skills are rapidly disappearing. In addition to the cultural factors there are factors arising out of the underlying political conflict in the region, including trauma, poverty, overcrowding, and a discontinuous educational process, that played strong roles in the illiteracy of the women and the often

inadequate education of their children. These environmental factors have become more severe and have combined to produce widespread early school leaving and the perpetuation of functional illiteracy among the younger members of the population. The study concludes with a discussion of the influence the women's views of literacy have on their literacy goals and how the results of this study may influence a family literacy program designed to bring these women and their pre-school children into the literate world.